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ABSTRACT

Philosophers and poets from classical times to the present have argued that playful and amiable discourse are conducive to teaching and learning. The play principle enhances reading and study and should be applied by teachers to benefit their students. Teachers should help their students see that it is fun to enliven the imagination with good literature. Once into the game, and as their enthusiasm grows, students can be encouraged to reflect on questions about literary analysis and interpretation. Even in advanced literature courses, the play principle is an asset, since even talented English majors need to derive pleasure from literature before they will earnestly apply themselves to critical and scholarly studies about it. The re-creation of the spirit and the play of the imagination that poetry affords is a highly attractive reward to promise students in literature courses. (GW)

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Poetry and Play

Everyone who teaches English is delighted to read or see comic scenes having to do with schoolteachers. Dickens' deadly mockery of wicked boarding schools in Nicholas Nickleby, and Fielding's lampoons of sanctimonious preachers and nonsensical tutors, are unforgettable. And there is Pangloss in Candide. Or the goings on in an academic comedy closer to our time, Lucky Jim. Or the provincial schoolhouse scene that Fellini recalls in the film, Amarcord. In virtually all the episodes I remember, what the laughable instructors have in common is a predilection for taking themselves terribly seriously and expecting their pupils to revere them and all they profess. Our laughter increases as the pedagogues' frustrations multiply when their charges misunderstand, or ignore, or resist, or deliberately sabotage, the prescribed lesson for the day.

At the risk of sounding like one of those torpid schoolmasters, I'll make an obvious Hobbesian observation that comic episodes about academe delight us in large measure because we recognize the ineptitude of

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the teacher who has no sense of humor, no inclination to entice students into learning. Learning and teaching are a game; they are recreational, no matter how cultural or vocational the intended benefits are.

This is not to say that no work or study is involved. Nor is the game-concept, or the play-principle, a classroom-teaching method such as belongs in lesson plans or structured learning activities. Rather, the play-principle designates a manner and disposition, a general reflection of amiable personal relationships among students and teachers and the language and literature which they seek to appreciate together.

In her graceful encomium, The Greek Way, Edith Hamilton celebrates the Greeks from Homer to Pericles as the world's first Humanists, free to be realists, intellectuals, and poets. She reminds us that our own word for school comes from the Greek word for leisure. The Greeks employed leisure to think and talk about ideas and objects--that is, to pursue knowledge. To illustrate their salutary use of leisure, Ms. Hamilton tells an anecdote about Pericles and his chief officer having supper on the Athenian flagship the evening of an attack on an Aegean island.

One of their attendants was a handsome lad. As he filled the commanders' cups, Pericles admired the "purple light" upon his young cheek. The officer objected that "purple" was not so apt an adjective as "rosy." Then the conversation proceeded, each man capping the other's quotation of verse in turn. Thus they played at literary criticism, temporarily unmindful of the next day's business. Their literate relaxation reveals the cultivated playful mind, the love of learning with pleasure, that Ms. Hamilton deems the keystone of Greek civilization. She writes that "If nothing were left of Greek art and literature, the fact that they were in love with play and played magnificently would be proof enough of how they lived and how they looked at life."

We cannot miss the spirit of play in Plato's dialogues, the irony of Socrates, the mutual teasing and clowning, as he and Aristophanes and others exchange and debate ideas. Plato has Socrates archly confess: "Now watch out for my special trick which I have for everything I cannot solve." At another moment, the master-teacher exclaims wryly, "I have long been amazed at my own wisdom and do not believe it!"

From their observations of human behavior, Plato and solider Aristotle both connected idleness or leisure to mental-recreation and understanding. They perceived creativity as play. In the Laws, Plato goes so far as to say: "Man is made God's plaything, and that is the best part of him. . . . Hence, life must be lived as play. . . . so that men will live according to Nature. . .and having a small part in truth."

The thesis that play is a cultural phenomenon and a social function basic to civilization is persuasive in Johan Huizinga's Homo Ludens, Man the Player. The chapter on "Play and Poetry" argues a proposition that I recommend we take as a guide. Huizinga writes: "Poiesis, in fact, is a play-function. Poetry lies on the primitive and original level where the child, the animal, the savage, and the seer belong, in the region of dreams, enchantment, ecstasy, laughter. To understand poetry we must be capable of donning the child's soul like a magic cloak and of forsaking man's wisdom for the child's."

Lest Huizinga's notion of "donning the child's soul like a magic cloak" seems too fanciful, we can remember some of the times when stories, plays, and

poems captivated us. Some of our favorites simply transported us to where we could join fictitious characters in their adventures. Our best theater experience occurs when the make-believe on stage dispels the banal or mundane elements from the reality it imitates. When we cultivated literary sensibility in college and graduate school, we were enchanted traveling through our imagination to the places and people created by Chaucer or Shakespeare or Wordsworth or Yeats. Some of our favorite courses were those where a professor triggered the dramatic response to the works we read and talked about. Affected by his enthusiasm, or hers, we temporarily forgot that we were working in a course in a degree program. Our minds functioned more freshly, stimulated by the pleasure of our imagination. The play-principle was operating, and we regaled in the pieces we read; we didn't just study them, although that we had to do, too.

Since the play-principle enhances our own reading and study, it follows that we should apply it when teaching, to benefit our students. They can see in us that reading is fun, recreation we enjoy with favorite pieces. If we can lead immature readers

this far, we might actually be able to compete modestly with movies and t.v. programs, regardless of the technological handicap. In a little while, at least some of our students will appreciate their own imagination as much as they depend on the electronic sights and sounds they're used to.

We aren't t.v. producers, and most of us would be very hard pressed to direct the school play. But one thing we have is good material to enliven the imagination. All the writers we teach are on our side. They turn ideas into vivid glimpses of truth that we and our students recognize--often because we remember (or dream) the same things. Our poets transform concepts into verbal constructs that imitate and illuminate experience. They prompt us to see and hear their characters and discover ourselves among them. Above all, the poets want us to enjoy the story or drama of life revealed in passages connecting their visions to ours.

Our students don't have to be technicians to sense the language of poets waking their imagination and engaging their feelings. So, by whatever classroom-teaching methods, let us enjoy leisure and invite our students into the imagined world of the writers. In various ways, but always personally,

we can get our students to play a lively game of make-believe with writers by adopting dramatic or critical points of view. Imaginative reading and leisurely discussion have the power to take us away from the daily routine. What I earnestly advocate is an intelligent game to enjoy with our students because it projects in our minds refreshing images of truth seen through the mirror of our ready imagination.

Once we're into the game, playing on personal subjective enthusiasm, then we can become critical about it. Then we can ask if the students' perceptions and reactions spring authentically from within the works. Some method of analysis or interpretation can be employed to distinguish just what it is in a work that produces our thoughts and feelings. Which statements; which characters, action, events; which images and symbols affect each of us? And what can we see of a whole pattern? What combination of elements acts more strongly on one student or another, and why? If students reflect on such questions, they'll gauge how rich literature is and how complex their respective imaginations are. Then the game can become more artistic and philosophical--but always it is best as play, not a chore for initiation.

The psychoanalytical Norman Holland maintains that "interpretation re-creates identity." In the spirit of players, we should agree with our students that each one's personality is uniquely responsive to the piece he or she reads. Every thoughtful reading of a work has some portion of validity as long as it is based on the context, the intrinsic elements--regardless of how many more impressions any reader derives from memory or fantasy. But the latter impressions are worth considering, too, if reading poetry would promote personal development.

The manner and process of teaching poetry are surely not easy, notwithstarding one's reliance on amiable personal discourse. Twenty-five years ago, Douglas Bush assessed the difficulty "of teaching a slack-minded generation how to read." More than a decade ago, Marshall McLuhan alarmed us with bleak forecasts for the printed word and reading. The trend doesn't seem to have been reversed since then. But despite cultural crisis, future shock, and other unsettling notions, we can make small but valuable headway if we somehow lure students into reading for the fun of it, just to relax, without insisting immediately on distant goals. And if some students learn only a little more about themselves through poetry, then with a nod to Socrates, they will have learned a great deal.

And what about advanced courses in literature, the higher levels of study of assumptions and principles in areas of critical theory? Oscar Cargill's Towards a Pluralistic Criticism is a recent argument that "the gift of vitality to literature is one of the most important functions of criticism." And yet it is in advanced courses that we perhaps run the greatest risk of Pope's indictment of "the bookfull blockhead ignorantly read, with loads of learned lumber in his head." We expect advanced students to work longer or harder, but their effort must be gratifying to them if it's to result in learning. Even talented English majors need to derive personal pleasure from literature before they will earnestly apply themselves to critical and scholarly studies about it. In advanced courses there might be long reading lists and much stress on secondary sources, yet still the play principle is an asset, although the learning-game inclines more toward professional than amateur.

I believe then, that wherever we teach, we improve our chance for success by making the classroom a leisurely place for getting together amiably so that personal pleasure and learning are blended.

The technological world in which we live throws so many uncertainties and pressures on us that to relax here is all but prohibited. But we know that as often as we are able to enter the still center of our mind through poetry, that often we re-create ourselves a little. This is something we know through gratifying experience. Hence, recreation in literature or through the poetic imagination might also be the best offer we can make to our students. If they are attracted by the invitation, it is possible that in a while they'll seek pleasure in poetry on their own, and then more ambitious goals might come into view.